

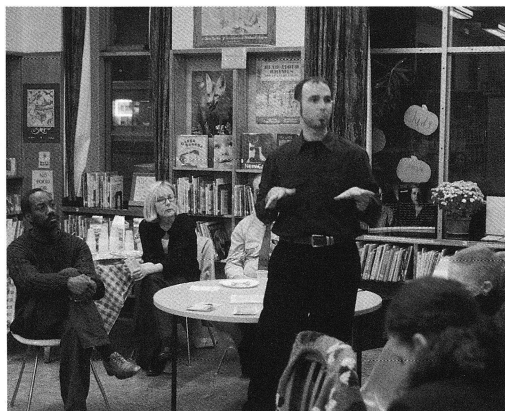
The RISD Museum

Exhibition Notes, Number 9, Fall 1999



Objects from *Memory of Surfaces*, 1999
(photo courtesy of the artist)

Memory of Surfaces an installation by
Ernesto Pujol November 19, 1999
through February 20, 2000



Ernesto Pujol speaks with local artists at Washington Park Branch, Providence Public Library (except as noted, all photos by Stephen Oliver)

The Esthetics of Knowledge:
A Conversation between David Henry
and Ernesto Pujol. The following conversation took place over the Internet in October 1999 between David Henry, Head of Education, The RISD Museum, and Ernesto Pujol, Art ConText artist in residence.

DAVID HENRY: *The title of your new installation, Memory of Surfaces, is intriguing. Does it refer to the memory embedded in physical surfaces, as if the objects were somehow animated, or to the memories that those surfaces evoke?*

ERNESTO PUJOL: The title aims to remain ambiguous. It refers both to the history that objects silently carry and to the memories they trigger. There are no meaningless objects: every object is guilty of a message, and objects associated with institutions traditionally serve to communicate the ideologies of those institutions.

DH: *Could you elaborate on the role of memory in your work?*

EP: Memory is the basic dynamic of my work. All my work, even that which engages in cultural and social critiques, begins with my memories. I seek to anchor all issues in the personal. This is one of the lessons of feminism, that the personal is the basis for credible historical practice.

DH: *Why do you present found objects rather than objects of your own making?*

EP: I normally combine pre-existing artifacts with objects of my own creation, such as small sculptures and photographs; but for this particular project—because I am exploring the evolution of the local cultural heritage—I am using more locally found artifacts than I normally do. I am trying to elicit a certain pride of place.



RISD students prepare to load books at Knight Memorial Branch, Providence Public Library

DH: *Art ConText attempts to provide models for artists working in collaboration with communities. What sort of challenges do you see in this way of working?*

EP: Modernism is based on authorship, on the signature of an independent artist. Community-related art, on the other hand, is based on the sacrifice of authorship: the artist is a facilitator. The more a project seeks to engage and portray a specific community, to strive for true community ownership of a final piece, the more the authorship issue has to be consciously negotiated in great detail throughout the process, and ultimately sacrificed at various levels; otherwise, the project runs the risk of not truly engaging and portraying a community.

Although a visiting artist may be clever enough to mine a community and temporarily create the semblance of engagement, sooner or later that community is going to be left behind, feeling somewhat exploited. With *Memory of Surfaces*, I have retained intellectual authorship, but I have sacrificed my material ownership of the installation. Most of the furniture and objects employed in the installation are on loan from the local public library system and will be returned afterwards. I will take very little back to my studio besides the documentation.

DH: *That leads me to my next question. How has the City of Providence inspired or informed this new work?*

EP: I first visited Providence on a rainy, gray February day in 1999, and I was moved by the beautiful heritage of nineteenth-century North American furniture and objects that I first saw preserved and displayed at the Museum and which I later encountered in use and in storage throughout the reading rooms, attics, and basements of the branches of the Providence Public Library (PPL). It was also interesting to me how these few remaining artifacts, which once formed part of very sensual, poetic, formal environments, contrasted with the new esthetic being generated by the information revolution. The old environments engaged all of our senses: the smell of old books and freshly waxed woods, the warm sight of yellow lamps and richly colored bindings, the sounds of whispers as people read to themselves, the feel of many textures. Now we punch and click rather than caress, and virtual color has replaced pigment, but I did not want to give in to nostalgia. I have not dismissed the new esthetic as dehumanized and dehumanizing.

The new esthetic was not created by aliens. We have created it, and we are increasingly trying to make it more organic through better industrial design. Thus, the unfolding history of the City of Providence began to engender this installation; and I returned to New York to write a proposal for a new site-specific piece engaging these two different esthetics in a visual dialogue. Months later, I was back with a basic template for the installation, but its contents have kept changing along the way, as dictated by the many artifacts and stimulating conversations that Providence unexpectedly keeps supplying me with, establishing more layers of meaning for the piece and taking it in other directions, such as the mythology of American boyhood.

DH: *The mythology of American boyhood?*

EP: I am very interested in our traditional notions of masculinity and power: patriarchy. I have unexpectedly found some objects that address this indirectly,



Books in transit

creating another layer of meaning, a subtler subtext if you will...but I do not want to give all my metaphors away, or the piece may become over-exposed and lose its nuances.

DH: *Please talk a bit about the communities you have engaged in this residency.*

EP: I am working with people from four institutions, which I am addressing as communities. They are the students from RISD (Rhode Island School of Design), where I am teaching an installation seminar this semester; the staff of PPL, the staff and membership of RISD's art museum; and a small group of high-school students from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Providence Public Charter School. If we define culture as the way in which a specific people, in a specific time and place, choose to define and represent themselves, then I am engaging the culture of these four communities. Each, over time, has developed its own set of policies, practices, insider-documented history, and public image, like micro-societies.

DH: *Have you gained any new insights through this project into the challenges that libraries and museums are currently facing?*

EP: Prior to this project, I had not visited a library in years. Accessing knowledge is becoming an increasingly private and sometimes isolated process that questions the very existence of libraries as public spaces. As more people gain access to the Internet, they can gather information without leaving their homes or places of employment. Bookstores understand this, with their on-line catalogues for people like me, as well as their new cafés and lounge-style contemporary or retro décor for young people who seek not only knowledge, but also human contact.

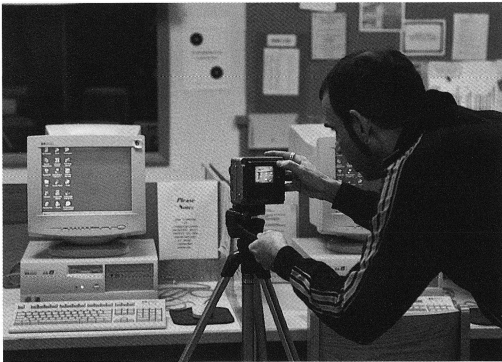
Libraries are finding it necessary to reinvent themselves. In the future, they may have to operate like booksellers, arranging loans over the Internet rather than through real human contact, as well as creating less formal environments that imitate the home and allow for more socialization. As people are able to download information and books become historical artifacts, libraries may need to make very difficult preservation choices and selectively deaccession more books, initiating "Adopt-a-Book" drives, so as to ethically dispense with some of their load.

Of course, libraries have been more all-encompassing than museums in the kind of "net" they have cast out at human knowledge, gathering in a much wider spectrum. Museums have traditionally been regarded both as cultural vaults and as dictators of quality, which is more often than not a time- and culture-bound manifestation of regional taste. Because of their broader mandate, libraries have nevertheless managed to remain fairly alive. The challenge they face is that people now access their collections in different ways, and they have to figure out how to adjust to this and gradually update their management of physical space and inventory. It occurs to me that the PPL system should engage RISD's industrial designers and architects in a conversation about these issues. I have seen beautiful portfolios from RISD graduate students.

Museums, on the other hand, have often become mausoleums by their entrenched exercise of increasingly inappropriate and dated notions of taste disguised as standards of quality. The presence of the past, as manifested in their permanent collections, is both their virtue and their undoing. If museums continue to behave as walled fortresses under siege, they will become increasingly irrelevant. Museums that merely linger on, trapped in the bureaucratic fantasy of self-perpetuation—the narcissistic curse of all grand old institutions, long after they have lost their relevance to the population beyond their walls—should be challenged in their programming and staff profiles.

DH: *What are your thoughts for the institutional growth of museums?*

EP: Change must be generated, first and foremost, by an innovative handling of permanent collections. A permanent collection must be a living thing, constantly re-examined and periodically restaged. Museums often make the mistake of placing the responsibility for change solely on their contemporary art programming, yet contemporary art is very hard for new audiences to understand. So much of contemporary art is hermetic—caught in a conversation with itself, as with contemporary art that references Modernism (artworks that consciously point back to previous artworks)—rather than a conversation between art and society. Long-term change should begin from a fresh rethinking of a permanent collection, placing it in more frequent and meaningful dialogue with the outside world. Museums have to take risks. Their future depends on it.



Pujol taking digital images at the Main Branch of the Providence Public Library



Objects from *Memory of Surfaces*, 1999
(photo courtesy of the artist)



Pujol with participating RISD students: (left to right, front) Anne Finnerty, Lori Dawson, Pujol, Jason Sung Won Yoon; (back) Saskia Bostelmann, Tomoo Nitta, José F. Vázquez-Pérez

DH: As a visual artist, do you feel any responsibility to public arts education?

EP: That is a complex issue because traditional curatorial practice has regarded artists and art engaged in education as compromised, as not formal enough, as lacking in quality. I regard that as an ignorant notion, the product of our American tendency towards intellectual and esthetic isolationism. It is an increasing part of international contemporary art practice for artists to be engaged in the writing about and public presentation of their work.

The contemporary artist is being called upon more than ever before to converse with audiences about his or her process and product. We are experiencing globalization, the decentralizing of the art world as we have known it since the Second World War. We are currently witnessing the end of the hegemony of American Post-War Modernism as a universal standard for quality, which was the result of our cultural imperialism. There are other visual-art traditions in the world. We should not be so provincial. Contemporary art can be engaged in educational initiatives while retaining strong formal qualities (Western and otherwise) that meet the full rigor of critical practice.

Of course, as I briefly mentioned before with regard to metaphor, a piece that is created in the service of an educational initiative also runs the risk of becoming over-exposed, even as it retains its formal qualities. Work that is created in this context needs to preserve a certain measure of metaphor, of mystery. This, like the issue of authorship, needs to be negotiated early on and constantly. It is not easy to achieve these goals, but it is possible. It is a wonderful challenge.



Ernesto Pujol, American, b. Cuba, 1957, *Untitled (Blue Boy)*, 1996 (courtesy Galeria Ramis Barquet, New York)

Ernesto Pujol is an installation artist based in New York. He pursued undergraduate work in humanities and painting at the University of Puerto Rico and graduate work in art therapy at Pratt Institute and in media theory at Hunter College. He has taught at Vermont College, Cooper Union, and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A former fellow of the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation/NEA and the Pollock Krasner and Joan Mitchell Foundations, he has exhibited widely in the United States and Europe. In 1997, Pujol participated in the Second Johannesburg Biennial, and he was the first Cuban-American artist to participate in a Havana Biennial.

Ernesto Pujol has been the Art ConText artist-in-residence at Rhode Island School of Design and the Providence Public Library from September through December 1999. During this time he has taught a class for RISD students, who have assisted in the realization of the project, and has visited a number of PPL branches, where he has talked with librarians, local artists, and other members of the community. The majority of items used in the installation have been borrowed from various PPL branches. Pujol and art teachers from The RISD Museum spent time with students from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Providence Public Charter School, making books and studying the roles of libraries and museums. It is the whispered voices of these high-school students that are heard in the installation. The digital images on the wall were shot at the Main Branch of the Library.

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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island



Art ConText

Memory of Surfaces is the fourth Art ConText project. Art ConText, a partnership between the Providence Public Library and The RISD Museum, is designed to introduce new audiences to contemporary art; to bring art and reading programs to library branches throughout Providence; and to provide opportunities for RISD students to apply their talents. Funding for Art ConText is provided by Pew Charitable Trusts, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the National Endowment for the Arts.